

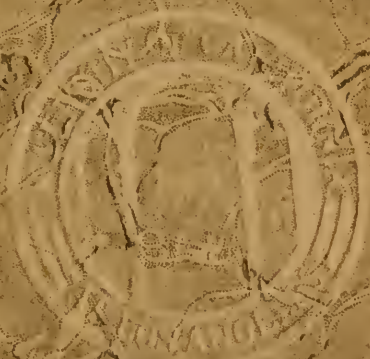
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GREAT ACTING  
IN ENGLISH.



GREAT ACTING IN ENGLISH. BY  
ARTHUR SYMONS.

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## Great Acting in English.

WHY is it that we have at the present moment no great acting in England? We can remember it in our own time, in Irving, who was a man of individual genius. In him it was the expression of a romantic temperament, really Cornish, that is, Celtic, which had been cultivated like a rare plant, in a hot-house. Irving was an incomparable orchid, a thing beautiful, lonely, and not quite normal. We have one actress now living, an exception to every rule, in whom a rare and wandering genius comes and goes: I mean, of course, Mrs. Patrick Campbell. She enchants us, from time to time, with divine or magical improvisations. We have actresses who have many kinds of charm, actors who have many kinds of useful talent; but have we in our whole island two actors capable of giving so serious, so intelligent, so carefully finished, so vital an interpretation of Shakespeare, or, indeed, of rendering any form of poetic drama on the stage, as the Englishman and Englishwoman who came to us in 1907 from America, in the guise of Americans: Julia Marlowe and Edward Sothorn?

The business of the manager, who in most cases is also the chief actor, is to produce a concerted action between his separate players, as the conductor does between the instruments in his orchestra. If he does not bring them entirely under his influence, if he (because, like the conductor of a pot-house band, he is himself the first fiddle) does not subordinate himself as carefully to the requirements of the composition, the result will be worthless as a whole, no matter what individual talents may glitter out of it. What

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should we say if the first fiddle insisted on having a cadenza to himself in the course of every dozen bars of the music? What should we say if he cut the best parts of the 'cellos, in order that they might not add a mellowness which would slightly veil the acuteness of his own notes? What should we say if he rearranged the composer's score for the convenience of his own orchestra? What should we say if he left out a beautiful passage on the horn because he had not got one of the two or three perfectly accomplished horn-players in Europe? What should we say if he altered the time of one movement in order to make room for another, in which he would himself be more prominent? What should we say if the conductor of an orchestra committed a single one of these criminal absurdities? The musical public would rise against him as one man, the pedantic critics and the young men who smoke as they stand on promenade floors. And yet this, nothing more nor less, is done on the stage of the theatre whenever a Shakespeare play, or any serious work of dramatic art, is presented with any sort of public appeal.

In the case of music, fortunately, something more than custom forbids: the nature of music forbids. But the play is at the mercy of the actor-manager, and the actor-manager has no mercy. In England a serious play, above all a poetic play, is not put on by any but small, unsuccessful, more or less private and unprofessional people with any sort of reverence for art, beauty, or, indeed, for the laws and conditions of the drama which is literature as well as drama. Personal vanity and the pecuniary necessity of long runs are enough in themselves to account for the failure

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of most attempts to combine Shakespeare with show, poetry with the box-office. Or is there in our actor-managers a lack of this very sense of what is required in the proper rendering of imaginative work on the stage?

It is in the staging and acting, the whole performance and management, of such typical plays of Shakespeare as "Hamlet," "Romeo and Juliet," and "Twelfth Night" that Mr. Sothorn and Miss Marlowe have shown the whole extent of their powers, and have read us the lesson we most needed. The mission of these two guests has been to show us what we have lost on our stage and what we have forgotten in our Shakespeare. And first of all I would note the extraordinary novelty and life which they give to each play as a whole by their way of setting it in action. I have always felt that a play of Shakespeare, seen on the stage, should give one the same kind of impression as when one is assisting at "a solemn music." The rhythm of Shakespeare's art is not fundamentally different from that of Beethoven, and "Romeo and Juliet" is a suite, "Hamlet" a symphony. To act either of these plays with whatever qualities of another kind, and to fail in producing this musical rhythm from beginning to end, is to fail in the very foundation. Here the music was unflawed; there were no digressions, no eccentricities, no sacrifice to the actor. This astonishing thing occurred: that a play was presented for its own sake, with reverence, not with ostentation; for Shakespeare's sake, not for the actor-manager's.

And from this intelligent, unostentatious way of giving Shakespeare there come to us, naturally, many lessons. Until I saw this performance of "Romeo and Juliet" I

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thought there was rhetoric in the play, as well as the natural poetry of drama. But I see that it only needs to be acted with genius and intelligence, and the poetry consumes the rhetoric. I never knew before that this play was so near to life, or that every beauty in it could be made so inevitably human. And this is because no one else has rendered, with so deep a truth, with so beautiful a fidelity, all that is passionate and desperate and an ecstatic agony in this tragic love which glorifies and destroys Juliet. The decorative Juliet of the stage we know, the lovely picture, the *ingénue*, the prattler of pretty phrases ; but this mysterious, tragic child, whom love has made wise in making her a woman, is unknown to us outside Shakespeare, and perhaps even there. Mr. Sothern's Romeo has an exquisite passion, young and extravagant as a lover's, and is alive. But Miss Marlowe is not only lovely and pathetic as Juliet ; she is Juliet. I would not say that Mr. Sothern's Hamlet is the only Hamlet, for there are still, no doubt, "points in Hamlet's soul unseized by the Germans yet." Yet what a Hamlet ! How majestic, how simple, how much a poet and a gentleman ! To what depth he suffers ! How magnificently he interprets, in the crucifixion of his own soul, the main riddles of the universe ! In "Hamlet," too, I saw deeper meanings than I had ever seen in the play when it was acted. Mr. Sothern was the only quite sane Hamlet ; his madness is all the outer covering of wisdom ; there was nothing fantastic in his grave, subdued, powerful, and piteous representation, in which no symbol, no metaphysical Faust, no figment of a German brain, loomed before us, but a man, more to be pitied and not less to be

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honoured than any man in Elsinore. I have seen romantic, tragic, exceptional Hamlets, the very bells on the cap of "Fortune's fool." But at last I have seen the man himself, as Shakespeare saw him living, a gentleman as well as a philosopher, a nature of fundamental sincerity; no melancholy clown, but the greatest of all critics of life. And the play, with its melodrama and its lyrical ecstasy, moved before one's eyes like a religious service.

How is it that we get from the acting and management of these two actors a result which no one in England has ever been able to get? Well, in the first place, as I have said, they have the odd caprice of preferring Shakespeare to themselves; the odd conviction that fidelity to Shakespeare will give them the best chance of doing great things themselves. Nothing is accidental, everything obeys a single intention; and what, above all, obeys that intention is the quality of inspiration, which is never absent and never uncontrolled. Intention without the power of achievement is almost as lamentable a thing as achievement not directed by intention. Now here are two players in whom technique has been carried to a supreme point. There is no actor on our stage who can speak either English or verse as these two American actors can. It is on this preliminary technique, this power of using speech as one uses the notes of a musical instrument, that all possibility of great acting depends. Who is there that can give us, not the external gesture, but the inner meaning, of some beautiful and subtle passage in Shakespeare? One of our actors will give it sonorously, as rhetoric, and another eagerly, as passionate speech, but no one with the precise accent of a man who

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is speaking his thoughts, which is what Shakespeare makes his characters do when he puts his loveliest poetry into their mouths. Look at Mr. Sothern when he gives the soliloquy "To be or not to be," which we are accustomed to hear spoken to the public in one or another of many rhetorical manners. Mr. Sothern's Hamlet curls himself up in a chair, exactly as sensitive reflective people do when they want to make their bodies comfortable before setting their minds to work; and he lets you overhear his thoughts. Every soliloquy of Shakespeare is meant to be overheard, and just so casually. To render this on the stage requires, first, an understanding of what poetry is; next, a perfect capacity of producing by the sound and intonation of the voice the exact meaning of those words and cadences. Who is there on our stage who has completely mastered those two first requirements of acting? No one now acting in English, except Julia Marlowe and Edward Sothern.

What these two players do is to give us, not the impression which we get when we see and admire fine limitations, but the impression which we get from real people who, when they speak in verse, seem to be speaking merely the language of their own hearts. They give us every character in the round, whereas with our actors we see no more than profiles. Look, for contrast, at the Malvolio of Mr. Sothern. It is an elaborate travesty, done in a disguise like the solemn dandy's head of Disraeli. He acts with his eyelids, which move while all the rest of the face is motionless; with his pursed, reticent mouth, with his prim and pompous gestures; with that self-consciousness



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which brings all Malvolio's troubles upon him. It is a fantastic, tragically comic thing, done with rare calculation, and it has its formal, almost cruel share in the immense gaiety of the piece. The play is great and wild, a mockery and a happiness; and it is all seen and not interpreted, but the mystery of it deepened, in the clown's song at the end, which, for once, has been allowed its full effect, not theatrical, but of pure imagination.

So far I have spoken only of those first requirements, those elementary principles of acting, which we ought to be able to take for granted; only, in England, we cannot. These once granted, the individual work of the actor begins, his power to create with the means at his disposal. Let us look, then, a little more closely at Miss Marlowe. I have spoken of her Juliet, which is no doubt her finest part. But now look at her Ophelia. It is not, perhaps, so great a triumph as her Juliet, and merely for the reason that there is little in Ophelia but an image of some beautiful bright thing broken. Yet the mad scene will be remembered among all other renderings for its edged lightness, the quite simple poetry it makes of madness; above all, the natural pity which comes into it from a complete abandonment to what is essence, and not mere decoration, in the spoiled brain of this kind, loving, and will-less woman. She suffers, and is pitifully unaware of it, there before you, the very soul naked and shameless with an innocence beyond innocence. She makes the rage and tenderness of Hamlet towards her a credible thing.

In Juliet Miss Marlowe is ripe humanity, in Ophelia that same humanity broken down from within. As Viola in

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"Twelfth Night" she is the woman let loose, to be bewitching in spite of herself; and here again her art is tested, and triumphs, for she is bewitching, and never trespasses into jauntiness on the one hand, or, on the other, into that modern sentiment which the theatre has accustomed itself to under the name of romance. She is serious, with a calm and even simplicity, to which everything is a kind of child's play, putting no unnecessary pathos into a matter destined to come right in the end. And so her delicate and restrained gaiety in masquerade interprets perfectly, satisfies every requirement, of what for the moment is whimsical in Shakespeare's art.

Now turn from Shakespeare, and see what can be done with the modern make-believe. Here, in "Jeanne d'Arc," is a recent American melodrama, written ambitiously, in verse which labours to be poetry. The subject was made for Miss Marlowe, but the play was made for effect, and it is lamentable to see her, in scenes made up of false sentiment and theatrical situations, trying to do what she is ready and able to do; what, indeed, some of the scenes give her the chance to be: the little peasant girl, perplexed by visions and possessed by them, and also the peasant saint, too simple to know that she is heroic. Out of a play of shreds and patches one remembers only something which has given it its whole value: the vital image of a divine child, a thing of peace and love, who makes war angelically.

Yet even in this play there was ambition and an aim. Turn, last of all, to a piece which succeeded with London audiences better than Shakespeare, a burlesque of American origin, called "When Knighthood was in Flower." Here



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too I seemed to discern a lesson for the English stage. Even through the silly disguises of this inconceivable production, which pleased innocent London as it had pleased indifferent New York, one felt a certain lilt and go, a touch of nature among the fool's fabric of the melodrama, which set the actress far above our steady practitioners in the same art of sinking. And, above all, a sense of parody pierced through words and actions, commenting wittily on the nonsense of romance which so many were so willing to take seriously. She was a live thing, defiantly and gaily conscious of every absurdity with which she indulged the babyish tastes of one more public.

An actor or actress who is limited by talent, personality, or preference to a single kind of rôle is not properly an artist at all. It is the curse of success that, in any art, a man who has pleased the public in any single thing is called upon, if he would turn it into money, to repeat it, as exactly as he can, as often as he can. If he does so, he is, again, not an artist. It is the business of every kind of artist to be ceaselessly creative, and, above all, not to repeat himself. When I have seen Miss Marlowe as Juliet, as Ophelia, and as Viola, I am content to have seen her also in a worthless farce, because she showed me that she could go without vulgarity, lightly, safely, through a part that she despised : she did not spoil it out of self-respect ; out of a rarer self-respect she carried it through without capitulating to it. Then I hear of her having done Lady Teazle and Imogen, the Fiammetta of Catulle Mendès and the Salome of Hauptmann ; I do not know even the names of half the parts she has played, but I can imagine her playing

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them all, not with the same poignancy and success, but with a skill hardly varying from one to another. There is no doubt that she has a natural genius for acting. This genius she has so carefully and so subtly trained that it may strike you at first sight as not being genius at all ; because it is so much on a level, because there are no fits and starts in it ; because, in short, it has none of the attractiveness of excess. It is by excess that we for the most part distinguish what seems to us genius ; and it is often by its excess that genius first really shows itself. But the rarest genius is without excess, and may seem colourless in his perfection, as Giorgione seems beside Titian. But Giorgione will always be the greater.

I quoted to an old friend and fervent admirer of Miss Marlowe the words of Bacon which were always on the lips of Poe and of Baudelaire, about the "strangeness in the proportions" of all beauty. She asked me, in pained surprise, if I saw anything strange in Miss Marlowe. If I had not, she would have meant nothing for me, as the "faultily faultless" person, the Mrs. Kendal, means nothing to me. The confusion can easily be made, and there will probably always be people who will prefer Mrs. Kendal to Miss Marlowe, as there are those who will think Mme. Melba a greater operatic singer than Mme. Calvé. What Miss Marlowe has is a great innocence, which is not, like Duse's, the innocence of wisdom, but a childlike and yet wild innocence, such as we might find in a tamed wild beast, in whom there would always be a charm far beyond that of the domestic creature who has grown up on our hearth. This wildness comes to her perhaps from Pan,

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forces of nature that are always somewhere stealthily about the world, hidden in the blood, unaccountable, unconscious; without which we are tame christened things, fit for cloisters. Duse is the soul made flesh, Réjane the flesh made Parisian, Sarah Bernhardt the flesh and the devil; but Julia Marlowe is the joy of life, the plenitude of sap in the tree.

The personal appeal of Mr. Sothern and of Miss Marlowe is very different. In his manner of receiving applause there is something almost resentful, as if, being satisfied to do what he chooses to do, and in his own way, he were indifferent to the opinion of others. It is not the actor's attitude; but what a relief from the general subservience of that attitude! In Miss Marlowe there is something young, warm, and engaging, a way of giving herself wholly to the pleasure of pleasing, to which the footlights are scarcely a barrier. As if unconsciously, she fills and gladdens you with a sense of the single human being whom she is representing. And there is her strange beauty, in which the mind and the senses have an equal part, and which is full of savour and grace, alive to the finger-tips. Yet it is not with these personal qualities that I am here chiefly concerned. What I want to emphasise is the particular kind of lesson which this acting, so essentially English, though it comes to us as if set free by America, should have for all who are at all seriously considering the lamentable condition of our stage in the present day. We have nothing like it in England, nothing on the same level, no such honesty and capacity of art, no such worthy results. Are we capable of realising the difference? If not, Julia Marlowe and Edward Sothern will have come to England in vain.



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